

Making Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

December 16, 2018

©2018 Scott L. Engle

Isaiah 40:1–5 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Mark 1:1–8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Will we do our part to make a home suitable for God's Messiah?

It is a strange London evening in March, 1743, for a new Handel oratorio is premiering in the Drury Lane theater during Lent, a season when the theater scene is largely silent. But this is no ordinary premiere; it is fitting for the season. Handel has set Charles Jennens's libretto to music and it is titled, *Messiah*. As with all such undertakings, it has been a bumpy road to get to this evening. There are many empty seats in the Drury, but that matters little, for despite the murmurings of his advisers, the King has come to hear Handel's latest.

With Handel at the harpsichord and Matthew Dubourg, as orchestra leader, the overture focused everyone on what was to come. Then, the great tenor, John Beard, stepped forward with the opening passage chosen by Jennens, “Comfort ye, O comfort ye, my people, saith your God . . .”¹ From there, the audience was swept forward until,

¹ Isaiah 40:1

with the hall ringing “Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth,”² the king stood, acknowledging a greater king than himself, and the entire audience stood with him, now a tradition at all performances of the Hallelujah Chorus.

The Baptizer

Why did Jennens begin his libretto with a passage from Isaiah 40? For the answer, we turn to the prophet of God known as John the Baptizer. When we are introduced to John at the beginning of Mark’s gospel, he is living in the wilderness on locusts and honey, dressed in animal skin. John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and is actually performing some sort of ceremonial washing or plunging³ in the Jordan River. This all seems pretty strange to us, but it would not have been strange to Jews of Jesus’ day.

Jesus was born into a world of turmoil and trouble. The Jews believed that they were God’s chosen people, but they had labored under the ungodly oppression of foreign rulers and assorted pretenders for centuries. The Jews anxiously looked forward to the day when God’s promises to them would be kept and a messenger (see the quotes from Isaiah in today’s scripture) would come to announce the long-awaited arrival of God’s kingdom. Thus, when people heard of John out there in the Jordan wilderness plunging people into the river and announcing the forgiveness of their sins, many flocked to him. Could this be, they asked. Might John be Elijah? Might he even be the Messiah himself? Has our story finally come to its climax?!

And what did John tell them? Namely, that the great prophecies of Isaiah were coming to pass. The time had come, for Jesus did not arrive as a bolt out of the blue, but as the culmination of God’s work to restore humanity to righteousness and to heal all of creation. God’s Messiah was on the scene and the world needed to be made ready. . . “the valleys lifted up, the mountains brought down, make his paths straight” (from Isaiah 40) . . . even the landscapes remade. Highways are to be straightened so they will be suitable for a grand procession, in the way of ancient kings and emperors. Until the time of the Persian empire, when an ancient monarch traveled, workers would precede the king building a road suitable for the king’s travel. Thus, the obvious question is

Reading Isaiah 40-66

The first section of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, is set in the period of Isaiah’s ministry, about 700 years before Jesus. Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah as the northern kingdom of Israel was under enormous pressure from the Assyrians, who eventually overran Israel. These chapters are mainly concerned with the Assyrian threat, but, toward the end, look ahead to a time of exile.

The second section, chapters 40-66, is set during the period of the exile in Babylon. Thousands of Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding area had been moved a thousand miles from home. With seemingly no hope of returning after the burning of Jerusalem, the temple, and the ark of the covenant, the Jews sought to build new homes in their “prison,” believing that their exile was punishment for their failure to trust God (e.g., v. 2 in today’s reading). The later chapters of this section look ahead to the Jews’ return to Judah and their continuing failure, but also speak to the glorious fulfillment of God’s promise to restore all of creation.

Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah is the work of at least two authors. I’m persuaded that chapters 40-66 are the work of an anonymous (at least to us) prophet working during the time of the exile. There are sound literary and historical reasons to believe this, but I am most drawn to the emotion of these chapters. In them I hear the voices of people who have lost everything and the voice of the God who speaks to them.

² Revelation 19:6

³ The Greek word, *baptizo*, means “to plunge.”

how we, today, prepare for the arrival of God's Messiah. How can we make a suitable home?

Making a home

In the early 60's, the Robert Shaw chorale was set to perform Handel's *Messiah* in a large southern city, at a large all-white church. In the sanctuary, there were some seats set off to one side that were to be used by any black people who might want to attend. The entire sanctuary was full when it came time for the performance to begin.

After the orchestra finished its prelude, the tenor stepped forward to sing the opening aria. But the tenor didn't stop at the usual spot on the stage. Instead he walked across the sanctuary and stood in front of the "colored section." There, he began to sing, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God . . ."

I grew up in the deep South. I remember three restrooms in every grocery store – men, women, and colored; two water fountains; two waiting rooms at the doctor's office; the special section in the back of Shreveport's trolleys. To my shame, I remember that I was indifferent as a boy, blind to it all. It was simply the way things were. But looking back, I know that no one in that Atlanta sanctuary could have been unaffected by the tenor's enactment of God's words.

Good News is like that. It can hit us hard, open our eyes, move our hearts. And its arrival often catches us by surprise, like a bolt of cosmic lightning. A home suitable for God is a home characterized by justice, mercy, and peace. Will we truly make a home ready for the King of Kings?

Daily Bible Readings

More on John the Baptizer

Monday, Isaiah 40:1-11 The promised coming of God's kingdom

Tuesday, Matthew 3:1-12 Matthew's account of John's ministry

Wednesday, Luke 1:5-24 The announcement and birth of John the Baptist

Thursday, Luke 3:1-22 Luke's telling of John's ministry at the Jordan River

Friday, John 1:19-42 John's account of the baptizer's ministry

Saturday, Matthew 14:1-13 The death of John the Baptist

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: The Good News in *A Christmas Carol*